

DIRECTOR'S CHOICE

Aspects of Portraiture: Photographs from the Wadsworth Atheneum

The impulse to capture a person's likeness or reveal the essence of a subject's character in an artistic medium has always been with us. When photography emerged in the nineteenth century, anyone with a camera could produce a portrait. In the following century, when modernist movements such as Dadaism and Surrealism revolutionized painting and sculpture, photographic portraiture was also transformed. These fresh approaches to capturing the core of human character are well represented in the Wadsworth Atheneum's rich collection of Post-war and Contemporary photography. Traditional portraits going back to the 1940s are displayed in concert with symbolic portrayals using objects as surrogates for human subjects, and narrative portraits that often employ a mix of images and text.

Many of the artists represented in the exhibition participated in the MATRIX series which celebrates its fortieth anniversary this year. Also commemorated, are the patrons who gave many of these works to the Wadsworth Atheneum, with special homage to Robinson Grover, who passed away this spring. Robinson and his wife Nancy have generously enhanced the Wadsworth Atheneum's photography collection during their long and supportive involvement with the museum.

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Narrative Portraiture

They are gathered together for the last time, it is the end of the year, they are students at the Gymnasium Chases, the Jewish high school in Vienna, we are in 1931. What has become of them after so many years, what sort of life have they had? One of them recognized himself in this photograph, he escaped horror and lives today in New York, of the others, I know nothing. — *Christian Boltanski*

Boltanski conceived of his installation as a meditation on the universal themes of life and death. His portraits convey a story—poetic and tragic—that imbues them with their meaning. Narrative portraiture goes beyond physical characteristics to probe the circumstances of the subject's lives. Underlying this exploration is a message, often topical, social, or political, that eclipses the portrait itself. Since the 1970s, gender and racial identity have been consuming issues for many of the artists in this section.

Symbolic Portraiture

As a child I had great respect for the inanimate object. I could access Rimbaud through his atlas, his scarf, his fork and spoon... the relic has true meaning for me... I've always been talismanic. Robert [Mapplethorpe] was talismanic as well. He loved his slippers—black velvet with his initials embroidered in threads of burnished gold. —*Patti Smith*

Symbols have long been used in portraits to illuminate the identity of the sitter. From religious iconography to the tools of a subject's trade, objects have added layers of meaning to formal portrayals. Beginning in the eighteenth century, those objects sometimes actually replaced the physical likeness, and with the advent of Modernism in the early twentieth century, the symbolic portrait became a trademark of the avant-garde. Today it remains an important aspect of twenty-first-century portraiture.

Traditional Portraiture

A successful portrait captures many aspects of the subject's personality, places the subject within the world he has created, and must have a universality to raise it above being a good likeness into the realm of acceptance as a good photograph. —*Arthur Mones*

With the invention of the camera in the early nineteenth century, came the popularity of portrait photography, which helped drive the success of this new medium. Its quick results and cost efficiency created an industry that offered everyone the opportunity to have their likeness captured. As technology advanced, artists experimented with new techniques from Cibachrome to Polaroid, moving from conventional portraits to multi-panel, wall-sized installations. This gallery contains many portraits of artists, formally staged or at work in their studios, whose creations can be seen throughout the museum's galleries.